

SERMON for the 10th SUNDAY after PENTECOST
August 21, 2011
Matthew 16:13-20

Howard Potter was a farmer and he always looked like he just came in from the field, tall and spare and sunburned, his thinning gray hair always an unruly tangle. Dr. Potter was also the head of the Chemistry Department at Alma College in Michigan, where for a time I was a faculty member; and as one of a series of faculty lectures to the entire student body, he gave a lecture that I will never forget. He began with a question. The question was this: “Do you know how a mirror works? We all know what a mirror does, but how does it do it?” He went on to explain the chemistry of molecules reacting to light, but that wasn’t the purpose of the lecture.

How does a mirror work? I had never thought of asking the question, and that was exactly Dr. Potter’s point. It was all about asking the question and following where it leads. I was devastated by the sudden realization that all my life I had taken a common experience for granted and had never thought to explore the mystery behind it. The important lesson was not the explanation. The real message was the question itself.

Jesus asked his friends, “Who do people say that I am?” And then he asked, “Who do you say that I am?” He wasn’t taking a survey of public opinion and he didn’t have to angle for a vote of confidence. He knew the answers before he asked. It is the questions that are important. They are important because by asking them, Jesus is asking his followers to make a crucial distinction. That is to understand the difference between popular opinion and personal experience – between lessons learned at second hand, and truth internalized and understood at first hand; between a theoretical belief and an unconditional personal commitment; between “they say,” and “I say.”

The Book of Job is a parable along that same line. It is a novel, one of the greatest pieces of world literature because it deals with the huge question about why bad things happen to good people. The story is familiar: Job is a righteous man who suffers all sorts of woes and torments that he did not deserve, and naturally he blames God. He is surrounded by friends and counselors who offer all kinds of explanations about why a good God has inflicted punishments on this righteous man. Job wrestles and agonizes and stubbornly refuses to accept any explanation he is offered. Finally, God speaks to Job directly out of a storm cloud and there is

a confrontation. God says, "Gird up your loins like a man. I will question you and you will declare to me." After a long, tough conversation, Job finally admits that God is God and he is Job and his conclusion is, "I had heard of you by the *Message* bible has Job saying, "I'll never again live on the crumbs of hearsay."

Jesus asks, "Who do people say that I am?" That's the hearsay. "Who do you say that I am?" Peter said, "You are the Messiah, the son of the living God." That's the conclusion of the mind and heart of one who has seen at first hand and believed.

The hearsay response is not necessarily bad. Most of us are here because of what we have heard, what we have been taught, what we have inherited from our families and our culture. Most of us are struggling toward that first hand, face to face response to God and to his Christ that we call faith. Sometimes the paraphernalia of religion, things that ought to be channels of faith, become absorbing problems or attractive diversions.

I find it hard to recite the Creed of our faith without putting in little asterisks and footnotes that signify a nagging question. That is only a shade better than reciting the creed as a rote exercise. Jesus' two questions still haunt and still drive that deeply personal decision. Am I confessing a faith? Or reciting a lesson? In one of his novels John Updike wrote, ". . . Away with spilt religion. Let me have it in its original stony jars or not at all."

I am sustained by the words of the Creed itself. It begins, "We believe in God, the Father almighty . . ." We believe. It isn't my creed, it is our creed, and when my faith wavers I am sustained by the ones around me, and by the great communion of saints whose faith persists when anyone of us falters.

Even Peter, mighty Peter, had his problems. The one who said, "You are the Christ," when he was put to the test said, 'I never knew the man.'" I suspect that the wise Jesus understood the fragility of his followers' faith and still saw in them the power of the apostles they would become. That is a way of affirming that God may see in us what we do not see in ourselves, and that our worship is less an expression of our faith than it is a response to God's confidence in us.